

Chapter Five: Outreach and Education

Educating Residents About Services and Taxes

The Committee's study of service duplication and its impact on taxes occupies the majority of this report. There are two additional areas, however, to which the Committee was asked by the City Council to direct its attention: to assist in the development of the City's upcoming citizen survey; and to consider and plan for ways to impart what the Committee has learned about service duplication and its impact on residents of the City.

Resident Survey of Quality of Life Issues in Takoma Park

Included in the City Council's charge to the Residents' Committee on Tax and Service Duplication Issues was the request that the Committee provide assistance and guidance in the development of the City's upcoming Takoma Park resident survey, particularly in connection with questions concerning city service delivery.

The survey will gauge resident satisfaction with the quality of life in Takoma Park. In June, 2004, the City Council approved initial plans to undertake the resident survey, authorizing the city manager to negotiate a contract with the National Research Center, a firm specializing in survey work. Under the plan, the National Research Center will prepare a six-page bilingual questionnaire to be mailed to approximately 3,000 residents.

The Committee believes that this report and its identification of alternative service delivery options in police, public works, recreation, housing and community development and library services will be useful to the City and the National Research Center in the development of such questions. Although the Committee became familiar with the initial plans associated with the citizen survey project, the magnitude of work associated with the review of City and County service duplication issues did not provide enough time for the Committee to formulate specific service survey questions.

Committee members will remain available to assist with feedback as City staff develops the survey.

The Committee feels obliged to take this opportunity to offer a word of caution about the search for citizen feedback about city services, and particularly about attempts to secure feedback on citizen priorities for higher or lower levels of services. Through its work, the Committee gained a deeper appreciation of the complexities and nuances that are associated with the City's wide-ranging delivery of services and the costs and benefits that attach to them. The multiple trade-offs that are associated with increasing or decreasing service levels make it difficult to reduce discussion of service delivery to the confines of a survey question. Therefore, the Committee believes that a richer and more beneficial dialogue with Takoma Park residents on city services would be available to the City through its use of forums, focus groups and other opportunities that provide for a more thorough and sustained discussion

of city services, far beyond what a survey can afford. The Committee urges the Council to consider the use of these avenues of discussion on city services as a supplement to the survey process.

Public Education and Outreach

The City Council also requested the Committee, as part of its efforts to become knowledgeable about the legal requirements and constraints of municipal tax duplication, to consider ways to reach out to the public to communicate what the Committee has learned and recommended.

With the assistance of City staff, the Committee undertook a range of efforts to inform the public of its work. We:

- Wrote articles about the Committee and its mission for publication in the City Newsletter and Takoma Voice. An article about the Committee and its work also appeared in the Takoma Gazette;
- Invited citizens to the Committee's meetings through notices in the City Newsletter, Takoma Voice and Takoma Gazette and provided opportunity for public comment at each meeting;
- Created a web page on the City's website (www.207.176.67.2/admin/tax/index.html) on which the Committee posted a considerable amount of material on double taxation and city services that form the basis of its report;
- Prepared minutes of each Committee meeting and posted those on the Committee's website;
- Created a list serve for public discussion of Committee business. All list serve messages were accessible through the Committee's website;
- Broadcast the December 1 meeting of the Committee, at which Montgomery County and Maryland Municipal League officials appeared, on the Takoma Park municipal cable channel, with multiple rebroadcasts on the channel; and
- Presented an interim report of the Committee's work and preliminary findings to the City Council at the Council's regular meeting on February 28. The Committee's presentation was aired on the Takoma Park municipal channel, and the PowerPoint presentation was posted on the Committee's web page.

Looking ahead, the Committee has developed a set of plans to communicate the findings and recommendations of this report. Those plans include the following efforts:

- Publication of the report for the City Council, with distribution of it to the leaders of neighborhood associations and civic groups in Takoma Park;
- Committee representatives also will be available to meet with neighborhood associations and civic groups to explain the report and its implications for City residents;

- Distribution of the report, under the signature of the Mayor and/or City manager, to appropriate municipal and county leaders throughout Montgomery County and the Maryland legislature. Committee representatives also will remain available to meet with county and state officials to discuss the report and its recommendations;
- Posting of the Committee report -- with continued availability of underlying support materials – on the City website; and
- Writing and publication of a series of articles in the City Newsletter about the overall findings of the Committee report and each of the service areas addressed by the report. This effort will extend through most of 2005.